

A BUILDER'S PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING A NEW HOME FOR A WHEELCHAIR USER: SAM'S STORY

As part of my PhD research project I interviewed four wheelchair users who had recently built a home. I also interviewed a family member who built a home for a relative who uses a wheelchair. It transpired he was also a builder. This is Sam's story – the fifth in the series of stories.

Sam has a cousin, who has a degenerative condition and to remain living at home she needed a house that would cater for her condition. It transpired that Sam was also employed in the construction industry. This would not have been an issue except it did not become clear until the interview was well underway that the Sam was working with erroneous facts and assumptions that he strenuously reiterated as correct. Nevertheless, the interview is included in this report as it revealed a quite different perspective of creating a home suitable for a person with a disability.

Sam began his working life as a tradesperson and now holds a senior position in a large building company. He and his father as owner-builders organised the construction of a new house for his cousin Paula, who uses a powered wheelchair and needs assistance with daily tasks. Her condition is expected to worsen as time passes and therefore an occupational therapist provided input into the design. At the time of construction Paula was mobile, but the design needed to accommodate the growing number of assistive equipment items as well as the circulation space for her wheelchair:

“She has equipment to help her navigate around the house, which we had allowed for but not to the nth degree – we didn't know what to expect. Some of the equipment is awesome.”

In addition to the space required for assistive technology, they had also considered the time when a carer would need to help Paula with showering and dressing:

“We didn't just design the bathroom for her at the time. We thought of her situation, she's not going to get better. She is going to have someone give her a hand to have a bath and a shower, and we designed all that in.”

Sam's misunderstanding of the public access standard (Australian Standard AS1428.1) and its application to private dwellings emerged at several points throughout the interview. As he believed the public access standard had application in private dwellings it caused him to take particular actions that he might not otherwise have taken. To better understand his approach, the threads of his misunderstandings are first drawn together before progressing to other parts of the interview.

Sam felt very confident that he had sufficient knowledge to design and construct the house to suit Paula's particular requirements. This is likely because of his previous

involvement with multi-unit dwellings, some of which are often required to meet the adaptable housing standard (AS4299), which in turn, refers to the public access standard (AS1428.1) for circulation spaces and dimensions of public bathrooms. When I questioned him about the correctness of applying a code for multi-unit dwellings to a single dwelling home he did not differentiate between them and proceeded to provide his advice on the situation:

“Let’s say if you’ve got a block of units and the council says ten of these units have to be accessible, you’ve still got to design it to the code. So on the drawings [for your house] if you had an accessible bathroom then they would ask to design it to the code.”

As far as I could discern, it seems that Sam thought that if he submitted construction drawings with a bathroom labelled as accessible or “disabled”, the Council would insist on compliance with the public access standard. However, I am at a loss to know why he would label the bathroom as “disabled” in the first place. He did not intend to use the standard anyway because he wanted to design it around Paula’s specific needs:

“The main thing we did was not to lodge in council the bathroom as a disabled or accessible bathroom otherwise we would have to design it to AS1428.”

I queried this statement to be sure I did not misunderstand his interpretation, but he confirmed his original statement. He then went on to say that an “accessible house” would have to be registered as such with Council and therefore meet the requirements of AS1428. Sam was keen to avoid this because, as he said before, he wanted to design it for Paula:

“If you lodge it as an accessible bathroom, [Council] are going to tell you, as part of their conditions, you have to design it to this code. So if you ever sell it as an accessible house, it’s designed to some sort of standard. So if we want to sell Paula’s house we can’t sell it as an accessible house because it is not designed to this standard or that standard – and we didn’t – we designed it to our standards – so it’s not an accessible house. So if you had that, Council would force you to design it to some sort of standard and you wouldn’t be able to design it to suit yourself.”

Sam is using “accessible” a regulative term rather than descriptive term. He claims that a house is only accessible provided it complies with AS1428, but of course the house is accessible as far as Paula is concerned. To be absolutely certain that we were not at cross purposes I asked if he had looked at the adaptable housing standard, which is specifically for housing whereas the public access standard is not. His response was to reiterate the issue of selling an accessible house:

“No, I didn’t [look at the adaptable standard] because we weren’t interested in selling the house – we weren’t interested in saying we were going to sell it or

advertise it as an accessible house – we were doing it for ourselves to suit my cousin.”

As an owner-builder, Sam was able to control the design and building process himself. His comment about installing the fixtures and fittings continues the theme of following the public bathroom access standard and his desire to deviate from that standard:

“I’ve been in the building trade for years so my father and I built it ourselves. We hired contractors to do whatever needed to be done and we installed the grab rails, toilet, showers – stuff like that – I just did it myself.”

The reason that Sam did it himself was more than just ensuring it was done to suit Paula. It was because he thought he needed to bend the rules:

“Knowing the rules, or standards, and the parts I could bend ... I knew what I could do and what I couldn’t do.”

Again, following the theme of adherence to the code, Sam thought that he should be responsible for bending the rules rather than ask a tradesperson to do so. He thought a tradesperson would want to install the grab rail at the height and position specified in AS1428:

“Personally, if I’m on a job and someone asks me to install a grab rail at a height that didn’t comply I would be questioning it. Not knowing the background behind it I would be saying I couldn’t certify this grab rail because it doesn’t comply with the [standard]. It would put me in a position where I would say to myself, hmm that’s not right. But not knowing the history behind it, you might have a person you are designing it for who wants it this way, but it doesn’t comply to the standard anymore.”

Directing tradespeople posed few problems for Sam because he was very directive and they followed his instructions. This is where industry experience was an advantage:

“We had no difficulties explaining to people what I was after. When it came to the tiling, I told them I wanted it graded this much, I want the tiles to be a rough surface and blah, blah, blah, and he was happy to do it, and he understood why – he didn’t bring up any codes or any standards – he just did as we asked based on the information myself, Paula and the occupational therapist.”

Sam then drew on his construction industry experience and explained that most of the time builders are just following instructions from the architect with “no questions asked”. He thought that people generally did not worry about the look of a unit or a house as long as it suited them in the here and now:

“In general, in units, people don’t care what they look like, or how they’ll feel when they are old. They going to want them designed for what they are now,

which is young and beautiful and the rest of it, and then you get an odd occasion where an old person who has money and says I want to design the house myself, and that's very, very rare. People don't think that far ahead."

Towards the end of the interview Sam asked me for more information about the my research project and after I mentioned project homes, he offered his insights. He went on to explain the design of the rest of his cousin's house and it was at this point I became aware that other members of the family were living on the second storey. Sam described wider doorways and seamless showers and was surprised these were not yet standard in project homes:

"Upstairs on the second level – we've got a two storey house, downstairs is designed for Paula, and upstairs is designed for us with good design practice, the doors are 820 wide, the hallways are 1100 wide, no steps into the bathroom – the showers are all seamless, flowing from the floor in – I can't believe they're not doing it. I've been off the tools for a couple of years now, but I thought they did that."

I asked Sam if building a home for his cousin had changed his view of what he might build in the future. Although he says he would not worry about the future, his previous comment indicates that some universal design features are already considered standard in his design schematic:

"Personally, right now, I think no. If I'm going to design a house, I'm going to design it to suit my lifestyle today – it's just being – you know – personally I think I would design a house to suit myself today not what will happen in the future."

Summary: Bending the rules

Sam and his father owner-built a home a two storey home for a family member with a degenerative condition, who occupies the ground floor while other members of the household occupy the upper floor. Sam mistakenly believed that designing a private dwelling for a person with a disability required application of the public access standard and this underpinned all his responses. It is likely that in his professional life Sam is very much dependent on rules, codes and standards to guide his actions, and this approach was carried into the interview. Consequently almost every question about design and building process was met with a reference to the public access standard and how he thought he had avoided alerting the local Council to his bending of the rules. The rules therefore acted as a barrier to a more in depth understanding: indeed, his approach, experiences and attitudes were all defined by and confined by regulations.

Nevertheless, Sam provided insights into what he believed was good building practice such as level access into bathrooms and showers and wider doorways and corridors. Consequently, Sam's comment about designing for his current lifestyle and not for the future should be taken in context of his understanding of good design. Sam may not, for

example, include grab rails, but he may include wider doorways, and level entry showers and bathrooms. However, his experience is that people do not design their homes with ageing in mind. Although this was not strictly speaking a homeowner interview as intended, it did show that construction industry personnel, have the same chance of having a person with disability in their family as any other member of the population. It also revealed that the industry can be misled by an incomplete, indeed erroneous, understanding of the rules and regulations in relation to making private dwellings accessible or universally designed.

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